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ABSTRACT

In May 1993, Peace Corps volunteers, environmentalists, and local educators attended a teacher training workshop in Harare, Zimbabwe. A learner-centered model constructed during the workshop represented community decision making, an activity based on simulations developed at George Mason University (Virginia). Using a joint decision making process, teachers from rural schools in Zimbabwe experienced cooperative learning while addressing a local environmental issue. The activity drew on a synthesis of constructivism and conflict resolution theory. This paper explains how the decision making model developed in Zimbabwe can be modified to help students address critical issues in any urban, suburban, or rural environment. The model allows students to become creative problem solvers as they take responsibility for addressing their own concerns. As students construct new solutions to complex problems, the conflict resolution process helps them develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to participate as responsible, open-minded, and creative community members. The document concludes with paragraphs developed to summarize the interests of parties attending the community decision making meetings in Zimbabwe. (LL)

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Session: Teacher Training to Introduce Conflict Resolution

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COMMUNITY DECISION MAKING

Mary Jo Larson

In May of 1993, ninety Peace Corps volunteers, environmentalists, and local educators attended a teacher training workshop in Harare, Zimbabwe. Using environmental themes, they developed strategies to improve the English language and critical thinking skills of rural secondary school students. Peace Corps training included sessions on learning styles and lesson planning, questioning and problem posing, peer networking, and cooperative learning.

One of the learner-centered models constructed during the workshop was **community decision making**, an activity based on lab simulations developed at the Institute of Conflict Analysis and Resolution (ICAR) of George Mason University. Using a joint decision making process, teachers from rural schools in Zimbabwe experienced cooperative learning while addressing a local environmental issue: elephant management.

Elephant management is a complex issue in Zimbabwe. The government has set aside over 12% of its total land area for national parks, and elephant populations have increased rapidly in these protected areas. According to the Ivory Trade Review Group (1993), Zimbabwe's elephant populations have grown to over 50,000. At times, elephants roam out of the national parks, which properly sustain up to 35,000 elephants. In the rural communities, elephant herds can be very destructive of farms and woodlands. This issue has economic relevance to rural Zimbabweans, particularly those living near wildlife parks. Whereas wealthy foreign tourists.and international environmental organizations describe elephants as endangered species, many poor rural families in southern Africa view the elephant as an abundant natural resource that can provide food and the income to pay for other necessities, such as school tuition.

Community decision making was designed to provide a learner-centered experience for teachers accustomed to traditional "chalk and talk" lectures about academic topics. Placed in cooperative learning groups, the educators participated in conflict resolution to address a "real life" issue. Each participant at the community meeting was given a description of his or her role and interests (see below). The parties were given instructions that outlined a joint problem-solving process and clarified the elements of relationship building. If they couldn't reach a consensus within the prescribed period of time, the group was required to reach a decision through majority vote.

This cooperative learning activity draws on a synthesis of constructivism and conflict resolution theory. The basic proposition of constructivism is that knowledge is developmental. Learning has no prescribed "rightness" or "wrongness." It is socially and culturally mediated, and non-objective. Participants search for meaning by addressing relevant issues, identifying key questions, and generating their own solutions. As the scenario evolves, learners begin to understand a problem from different points of view.

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While negotiating with each other throughout the meeting on elephant management, for example, the participants learned about the interests of (1) a rural community, (2) the tourist industry, (3) government agencies, (4) local environmental NGOs, or (5) international environmental NGOs.

The community decision making model developed in Zimbabwe can be modified to help students address critical issues in any urban, suburban, or rural environment. Students might decide to conduct research and participate in a problem solving meeting to address school vandalism, gun control, gang violence, substance abuse, or lack of recreational facilities. To introduce this conflict resolution process, teachers must be willing to allow students to brainstorm and analyze without offering solutions or giving judgemental feedback.

High school students generally prefer to discuss their problems with their peers. With the best of intentions, their parents and teachers tend to give more advice or information than teenagers need or want. This model allows students to become creative problem solvers as they take responsibility for addressing their own concerns. While talking about their school or neighborhood, students are taught to express their points of view freely, but respectfully. Community decision making is a joint problem solving process that helps learners to:

- Identify and prioritize common problems or issues,
- Identify key parties and decision makers,
- Conduct research to understand concerns and interests,
- Share strategies and generate non-violent alternatives,
- Analyze and prioritize possible solutions, and
- Negotiate and persuade to reach a group consensus.

Community decision making enhances the benefits of cooperative learning by introducing conflict resolution strategies. While developing their English language, critical thinking, and social skills, students are reminded that successful consensus-building requires patience, respect, and creativity. As they construct new solutions to complex problems, students explicitly address four of the key elements that affect the success of working groups: *purpose, roles, rules,* and *relationships.* Using Bernice McCarthy's 4MAT model for lesson planning, **community decision making** might include the following steps:

MOTIVATION

- Class discussion of current issues. How do people solve problems?
- Teacher explains **purpose** of lesson--to participate in a community decision making meeting to try to solve a common problem (issue).
- Generate issues by brainstorming about school problems, letters to the editor, community discussions, etc. (Think-Pair-Share or Journals)
- Allow students to prioritize issues and choose most critical.
- Brainstorm--who are the major parties with an interest in this issue? Who are the decisionmakers?
- Use a word web / graphic organizer to note key parties.
- Students choose **roles** and prepare to represent the interests of the major parties. (See examples below.)

INFORMATION

- Students conduct research, including interviews, to find out more about the issue from the perspective of their role.
- Students discuss interests in group representing the same role.
- Students summarize analyses and submit opinions and rationale to teacher.
- Teacher explains the community decision making process.
- Teacher dictates the five steps in the process (**rules**).

1. **In turn, explain your positions.**
2. **Identify and record major problems.**
3. **"Brainstorm" to suggest solutions.**
4. **Write down possible solutions.**
5. **Come to a consensus.**

- Teacher and students discuss values, attitudes, and behavior necessary for good working relationships.

PRACTICE

- Teacher reminds students of values, attitudes, and behavior necessary for good working relationships.
- Community leader reminds participants of process and purpose.
- Students participate in community decision making meetings, sharing interests, and generating non-violent solutions to problems.
- Students analyze and prioritize possible solutions.
- Students negotiate and persuade to reach a group consensus.

APPLICATION

- Students present the consensus of their group to the class.
- Students in class classify options generated by groups.
- Whole class votes on possible solution.
- Students write letters to editor (or articles) with their own opinions and recommendations.
- Publish letters. If possible, create a newsletter.
- Illustrate message with drama, song, poetry, ETC.

Community decision making is a conflict resolution process that helps students to develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to participate in a non-violent democratic society. As responsible community members, they analyze, articulate, and defend their own points of view. They learn to listen actively, challenging each others' ideas and working together to seek new solutions. Throughout the process, learners are developing a greater understanding of the key elements that lead to successful cooperation, including patience, respect, open mindedness, and creativity. While addressing critical community issues, teenagers (normally the villains) may even become the heroic constructivists of long-sought-after solutions!

The following paragraphs were developed to summarize the interests of the parties attending the community decision making meetings in Zimbabwe . Special thanks to environmental educator Miriam Zweizig and environmental researcher Timothy Donnay.

A COMMUNITY LEADER

Introduce yourself and welcome everyone to your community, which is located in the area around _____ (national wildlife park). Ask the participants to introduce themselves.

Remind everyone that the families in the community have great concerns about the elephants. Many rural communities are very poor. Some families view the protection of elephants with hostility. The elephants are sources of food and income. In some areas, the elephants cause the destruction of farm and woodlands. The community needs to become involved in elephant management.

Explain that each of the participants will have an opportunity to present his or her point of view before the group tries to reach a decision about this issue. Remind the group that everyone has agreed to be respectful of different opinions. The group will only have _____ minutes to make a recommendation. Emphasize that everyone will have a chance to speak.

Explain the plan for the meeting:

1. **Each person briefly explains his or her position.**
2. **Together the group will identify the major problems or issues.** ***These will be recorded.***
3. **The group will "brainstorm" possible solutions to the problems.**
4. **The group will agree to possible solutions.** ***These will be recorded.***
5. **The group will recommend a solution to the problem. If the group cannot come to a consensus, they will agree to next steps to be taken.**

Ask if there are any questions or comments.Turn to the person on your right. Ask that individual to explain his or her position first. (Participants will then take turns--moving to the right.)

B ZIMBABWE TOURIST DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

You represent a group of hotels, travel agencies, and outfitters in Zimbabwe. You explain that the income generated by the tourist industry in Zimbabwe is more than $50 million per year. Your organization wants to preserve and protect tourist areas, especially national wildlife parks. Your primary interest is to protect the natural resources of Zimbabwe so that tourists can enjoy them. You might consider allowing the local community to earn income from elephants, but only in a strictly controlled manner. If the community wishes to hunt elephants, this activity must be monitored very closely so as not to threaten the tourist industry. However, members of the local community must <u>not</u> be allowed to hunt in the national parks.

C LOCAL ENVIRONMENTAL NGO

You represent a Zimbabwean environmental non-governmental organization (NGO) based in Harare. Your position on elephant management is that communities should manage and benefit directly from wildlife, including the income generated by elephants. You explain that Zimbabwe has set aside over 12% of its total land area for wildlife parks. Elephants have increased rapidly in these areas. According to the Ivory Trade Review Group (ITRG), Zimbabwe's elephantpopulations have grown to over 50,000 in 1993. It is more than the parks can support. Vegetation has undergone dramatic changes. At times, elephants move out of national parks into rural communities. The rural communities are extremely poor and need income to provide basic needs for their families. You believe that communities should be allowed to hunt a limited number of elephants, which would allow them to eat the meat, use the hides, and sell the ivory. You propose that the local communities be included in the management of elephant hunting. For example, wealthy game hunters, primarily from overseas, would compensate the local communities when shooting a limited number of elephants. The number of elephants 'harvested' would be set and monitored by national parks, who would in turn receive a commission from the community.

D LOCAL HUNTER

You emphasize that you and your family are a members of the community--you are a local hunter-- NOT a poacher. You resent being called a poacher and you don't believe hunting elephants should be illegal. You don't hunt within the national parks. The current law states that you could go to jail for killing an elephant near your home. Your community believes that this is unfair. Your community believes that local families should have the ability to obtain meat from wild animals. You insist that you must protect your livestock, crops and family from any wildlife damage or threat. You must be allowed to hunt at any time necessary. Money from selling meat, hides and ivory would help to support your family with basic needs. You need money to pay for your children's school tuition. The community needs money to pay for school books and supplies.

E MINISTRY ENVIRONMENT AND TOURISM, DEPARTMENT OF NATIONAL PARKS & WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT

You present the official view of elephant management. This is a complex economic and political issue. The government supports policies that will improve economic and social development in Zimbabwe. You understand the importance of elephant management and ecological sustainability. You believe that culling is an effective way of managing elephants when the elephant population grows so large that it is damaging the habitat. You

believe in active anti-poaching measures, including a 'shoot-to-kill' policy for poachers. You are willing to listen to the proposal that communities surrounding national parks be allowed to manage wildlife populations using a quota system developed with the participation of the national parks. You realize that the elephant meat, hides, and ivory are resources that can supplement not only the communities, but research and management at the national parks.

F INTERNATIONAL NGO REPRESENTATIVE

You represent an international environmental NGO. Your main office is based in Washington, D.C. Everyone knows that elephant populations in Africa have been severely reduced. Your organization has an active membership and an effective public relations division. The main concern of your members is the survival of elephant populations in Africa as a whole. The Americans and Europeans who belong to your organization donate money to influence environmental policies. They continue to support a complete ban on the international ivory trade. They do not believe elephants should be culled. You are willing to learn more about alternative elephant management options.